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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000786

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: ANTI-HIZBALLAH FIGURE PUSHES FOR  
INDEPENDENT SHIA IN NEW GOVERNMENT

REF: A. BEIRUT 571

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 710  
[1](#)C. BEIRUT 733  
[1](#)D. BEIRUT 766

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Prominent businessman and head of the Nabatieh Chamber of Commerce, AmCit Abdallah Bitar, recounted threats and harassment he received from Hizballah because of his recent trip to the U.S with Ahmad al Assad. Bitar returned home to Nabatieh in southern Lebanon May 7 after Hizballah launched a smear campaign, attempted to remove him as head of the Chamber of Commerce, and hurt his business interests. Bitar reported that the media, judiciary, and law enforcement branches in Nabatieh, all "corrupted" by Hizballah, failed to defend his home, his family, or his reputation.

[1](#)2. (C) Believing that majority leader Saad Hariri would become the next prime minister, Bitar pushed to have Saad appoint an independent Shia minister from the south to his Cabinet. He reasoned that a non-March 14 Shia is best-positioned to counter Hizballah's influence in the south, and would empower other independent Shia to run for office during the spring 2009 parliamentary elections. (Note: Late on May 27, the March 14 majority coalition nominated Fouad Siniora, not Hariri, to be PM. End Note.) End summary.

HIZBALLAH/AMAL BACKLASH TO U.S. TRIP

[1](#)3. (C) Prominent businessman and head of the Nabatieh Chamber of Commerce, AmCit Abdallah Bitar, met the Charge and EmbOffs at the Embassy on May 27. Having returned early on May 7 from his trip with fellow independent Shia figure Ahmad Assad (Ref A) to the U.S. because of threats from Hizballah and Amal, Bitar recounted the aggressive campaign that was waged against him in his hometown of Nabatieh in southern Lebanon. He said that he and his family received threats after Assad's interview describing the U.S. trip and participants was publicized in pro-March 14 newspaper An-Nahar. Signs and leaflets were posted in Nabatieh declaring him a traitor, said Bitar.

14. (C) Bitar added that the 14 Chamber of Commerce members were forced to "resign" him. When Bitar appealed to Interior Minister Hassan Sabaa, who must approve all such motions, he was authorized to stay on as the Chamber's president. He wondered whether a new Interior Minister would respect Sabaa's decision. Bitar said he had a \$600,000 business in Nabatieh, which he was pressured to sell earlier this week for only \$200,000.

15. (C) He was confident that, although he has friends who are Hizballah and Amal Movement members, Hizballah was behind the intimidation tactics. He relayed that he heard Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri slapped his forehead in disapproval when he learned of his visit to the United States (Bitar had been close to Amal in the past). He noted that the other delegation members, Ahmad Assad and a Mr. Shofadi, escaped criticism. Bitar is paying for bodyguards to protect him now, he said. (Note: Assad chose to remain in the U.S. during the conflict and did not return to Lebanon until May 26, the day after President Michel Sleiman was elected. End note.)

HIZBALLAH CONTROLS MEDIA,  
JUDICIARY, POLICE IN SOUTH  
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16. (C) Recounting other abuses by Hizballah against independent Shia in Nabatieh, Bitar told us about Dr. Ahmad Chehab, who, after speaking out against Hizballah during the recent May clashes between the opposition and the majority, was kidnapped, beaten, shot by Hizballah, and left in critical condition on the steps of the local hospital. Bitar

BEIRUT 00000786 002 OF 002

explained that the incident was not publicized because the media in the south is controlled by Hizballah and Amal.

17. (C) The judiciary and law enforcement branches are also "corrupted" by Hizballah in Nabatieh, Bitar relayed. He said he reported Hizballah's harassment against him to the chief of police and the judge in Nabatieh, both of whom refused to take action. He said the head of the LAF G-2 (military intelligence) in Nabatieh, Col. Ali Nouredine, Berri's son-in-law, tried to have Bitar and his family arrested.

18. (C) Bitar believes the heated criticism against him is now dying down in Nabatieh, adding that some have even changed their minds and view his decision to speak freely in the U.S. in a positive light. He reported that he will continue to remain steadfast in his criticism against Hizballah, and that he is still going to his Nabatieh office regularly.

19. (C) He told us that Sayyed Ali al-Amin, who was the Mufti of southern Lebanon until the Higher Shia Council "fired" him on May 15 (Ref B), called to commend him for his courage. Al-Amin was unable to physically remain in the south and he was impressed that Bitar had done so. (Note: One of our Embassy contacts, independent Shia figure Lokman Slim, reported that he visited Amin on May 26 in Amin's Beirut apartment, and found Amin to be "more than depressed." Slim proposes that a formal lawsuit be filed against the Higher Shia Council on Amin's behalf "to keep the issue in the spotlight" and he is marshalling legal experts to work on the case on a pro bono basis. End note.)

SAAD NEEDS AN INDEPENDENT  
SHIA MINISTER  
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110. (C) Bitar argued that the competition between the moderates and Hizballah is at a turning point. If the moderates are empowered now, Hizballah's influence will decline. He correlated the threat of an Israeli attack to instability in Lebanon, assessing that this threat has decreased with the Doha agreement (Ref C) and the subsequent election of President Michel Sleiman (Ref D). Without the

threat of an Israeli attack, he hypothesized, Hizballah will lose legitimacy as a resistance movement. If the government accelerates the provision of services to Lebanese in the south, he continued, Hizballah's "raison d'etre" further diminishes.

¶11. (C) Assuming that majority leader Saad Hariri is the next prime minister, Bitar implored the Charge to speak to Saad about including an independent Shia in his new Cabinet as a means of "taking on Hizballah" in the south. (Note: Later the same night, March 14 nominated Fouad Siniora as the next prime minister. End note.) He reported that he has been trying to get an appointment with Saad to make the case himself. Hizballah will try to appoint Sunnis to the Cabinet who are hostile to Saad, he predicted. Saad should counter this strategy by appointing Shia hostile to Hizballah, he proposed.

¶12. (C) Acknowledging that MPs Ghazi Youssef and Bassem Sabbah are possible Shia ministerial candidates, Bitar rejected these individuals precisely because they are close to Saad. Instead, Bitar argued, Saad needs to appoint an anti-Hizballah Shia who "is not on Saad's payroll," because he will be more effective in countering Hizballah in the south. "This minister will work out of Nabatieh," he asserted. He cited the demise of Sayyed Ali Amin, claiming he was relieved of his post because of a perceived association with Saad and the Saudis.

¶13. (C) A Shia minister from the south would also benefit the majority during the end of spring 2009 parliamentary elections, Bitar posited. He reasoned that an independent Shia minister will give courage to other like-minded Shia to run against Hizballah and Amal. (Note: It was not clear whether Bitar was promoting his own ministerial nomination or that of Ahmad Assad. End note.)

SISON